

DEBBIE MUCARSEL-POWELL
26TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE

Congress of the United States
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June 5, 2020

Governor Ron DeSantis
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis:

As Florida moves to Phase Two of reopening today, I write to you with concerns and questions regarding the state's public health infrastructure, specifically with respect to the testing, tracing, and quarantine system needed to safely move through the phased reopening of our state. If we do not take the steps needed to curb the spread of COVID-19, I fear it will not only result in a second spike in cases but will also cause further economic harm to our communities.

According to the guidelines set by the White House Coronavirus Task Force, states are only to proceed to Phase Two if they satisfy gating criteria, including a downward trajectory of documented cases or positive tests, for 28 days without evidence of a rebound. However, the past 14 days has seen daily confirmed cases increase by an average of 11 percent, with numbers nearly reaching the levels of the peak of the state's pandemic. Despite these concerning statistics, the state has decided to progress through Phase Two of reopening today. As such, I would like to ensure that we are doing so with public health considerations in mind. As you know, in lieu of a vaccine, the most effective method to reopen our economies is to have a robust testing, tracing, quarantine, and treatment system in place.

Though some progress has been made with respect to testing, there remain significant questions as to who is eligible for testing and where they are able to get tested for free. Additionally, due to the initial significant challenges with testing, many are hesitant to either get tested or know that they should. Therefore, steps must be taken to reach out to the public and encourage them to get tested to find out where the virus is in our state and then conduct a robust tracing of exposed contacts.

However, this operation requires a robust contact tracing workforce, and I remain very concerned about the staffing levels of Florida's contact tracers. According to the National Association of County and City Health Officials, during normal times, there should be 15 health workers per 100,000 people. During a pandemic like the coronavirus, this doubles to 30 contact tracers per 100,000 people. A tool developed by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) estimates that this means that Florida would need, at minimum, 7,275 contact tracers, but recent reports indicate that the state only has approximately 1,000 tracers. With the

state short thousands of contact tracers, we cannot be confident that the spread of the virus is being contained.

This is discouraging, given that Congress has now passed two major pieces of legislation, the *CARES Act* and the *Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act*, which recognized the importance of contact tracing and appropriated significant funding that I fought for to expand upon this critical tool to fight the spread of COVID-19. The *CARES Act*, which became law on March 27, 2020, contained over \$1 billion to conduct surveillance activities, including contact tracing. One month later, on April 24, Congress built upon that funding with the *Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act*, which contained over \$12 billion for testing and contact tracing. In total, Florida has received over \$492 million in funding to conduct testing and tracing.

Unfortunately, details on the state's efforts and how this funding is being utilized remain sparse. As such, I request that you answer the following questions as soon as possible:

1. What is the state's current capacity for testing? Can anyone, regardless of symptoms, contact history, insurance status, or documentation status, get access to a test?
2. What steps are the state taking to utilize funding provided by Congress in the *CARES Act* and the *Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act* to expand testing in communities where access to testing is less accessible? For example, will the state be expanding mobile testing units that go directly into communities to provide testing?
3. What is the status of the state's contact tracing workforce? What steps are you taking to expand the contact tracing workforce to meet the recommended staffing level of contact tracers?
4. What local counties, municipalities, organizations, and universities are you partnering with in South Florida to recruit contact tracers and or increase the state's tracing capacity?
5. How are you recruiting and training contact tracers directly from communities they will be tracing, to ensure that the tracers are familiar with the needs of their communities and can conduct tracing in a culturally sensitive manner?
6. What digital contact tracing tools is the state implementing, and what is being done to ensure the privacy of data collected from digital tracing methods?
7. Once positive cases are identified, what is being done to ensure that anyone infected is being properly quarantined to prevent them from spreading the virus not only to the general public, but to close contacts and family members as well?
8. What steps is the state taking for infection control in communal living areas that are seeing new incidences of outbreak, such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities, prisons and correctional facilities, and homeless shelters?
9. In light of recent public demonstrations over the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd and other African Americans across the country, what steps are you taking to encourage all who attended a public demonstration to be tested for COVID-19?

I urge you to utilize the significant funding that Congress appropriated to build out a robust contact tracing workforce in order to keep Floridians healthy and safe. Successful containment of COVID-19 requires the testing of all mildly symptomatic cases and tracing all their contacts, followed by successful quarantine and treatment of all cases.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Debbie', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Debbie Mucarsel-Powell
Member of Congress